

VIEWING MANAGEMENT METHOD OF SPECIFIED CONTENT
RECORDED ON INFORMATION RECORDING MEDIUM

CROSS-REFERENCES

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BACKGROUND

The present invention relates to a viewing management method of a specified content recorded on an information recording medium such as a DVD.

10 DVD is a high capacity recording medium (media) that is currently becoming mainstream, and is used for recording audio/visual contents data such as computer programs and movies. A DVD-ROM is a playback-only disk, and DVD-Video and DVD-Audio are prescribed as the application formats thereof. A DVD-Video is a video format prescribed for use in
15 recording audio/visual contents.

In addition to being able to record contents data such as actual images and sounds, a DVD-Video is able to record control information for realizing the viewing regulation function or special reproduction function. For example, with parental reproduction, which is one of the viewing
20 regulation functions, a parental level is set according to age in consideration of the nature of the content. Further, DVD-Video is prescribed with a region code showing the areas where such content can be reproduced, and reproduction is permitted only when the region codes of the drive device, video reproduction device (player) and media all
25 coincide.

SUMMARY

As described above, although the DVD-Video is prescribed with various viewing regulation functions in terms of specification, from the perspective of media providers providing DVD media to users, this was not necessarily sufficient upon engaging in more detailed viewing regulations or viewing management (hereinafter simply referred to as “viewing management”). For example, there were requests from media providers for setting a time limit for viewing the contents, or enabling viewing management by performing user authentication prior to the reproduction of the content, and requests for enabling the charge in association with this user authentication.

As one technology for realizing this kind of detailed viewing management, for example, “DVD MAGIC” proposed by the applicant is known. This DVD MAGIC “locks” the DVD media to be distributed to the users, and, upon reproduction, the user acquires a key from the media provider’s site on the Internet and unlocks the DVD media to enable reproduction. According to this DVD MAGIC, since the user will access the media provider’s site upon reproduction of the DVD media, there is a merit in that the media provider will be able to lead users to contents other than the intended content naturally, and supplement the users’ viewing activities. For example, the gazette of Japanese Patent Laid-Open Publication No. 2002-218405 discloses an example employing this DVD MAGIC.

Nevertheless, this DVD MAGIC was originally developed based on personal computers, and general DVD players currently on the market were not able to realize the mechanism or function for performing a more

detailed viewing management as with DVD MAGIC. Meanwhile, to newly incorporate a scheme for performing viewing management in general DVD players is unrealistic when considering the compatibility with many of the DVD players on the market, and there are restrictions of giving utmost
5 concern to the specification.

Thus, an object of the present invention is to provide a viewing management function in a simple manner while giving consideration to the compatibility with existing visual reproduction devices.

The gist of the present invention is a viewing management method
10 for managing the viewing of a content recorded on an information recording medium readable/reproducible with a prescribed reproduction device, wherein an acquisition code prerecorded on an information recording medium is presented to a viewer wishing to view a viewing management target content, the viewer is urged to enter the password, authentication is
15 performed regarding the password input and acquired by the viewer from a server computer based on the presented acquisition code, and, when it is judged that the password is valid as a result of the authentication, the reproduction of the viewing management target content is started.

Here, it is preferable that the viewer uses an information terminal
20 device such as a mobile telephone to access the server computer, and to acquire the password in exchange for the acquisition code. Moreover, when the viewer acquires the password from the server computer, it is desirable to charge the viewing fee of the viewing management target to the viewer.

25 More specifically, the present invention according to the first perspective for achieving the foregoing object is a viewing management

method for managing the viewing of a content recorded on an information recording medium readable with a prescribed reproduction device, comprising: a step of the prescribed reproduction device that started reading the information recording medium presenting a prescribed acquisition code to a viewer, and urging the viewer to input a prescribed password; a step of a prescribed server computer accessed by the information terminal device of the viewer according to prescribed position information urging the viewer to input the prescribed acquisition code; a step of the prescribed server computer presenting a password corresponding to the prescribed acquisition code to the viewer upon receiving the prescribed acquisition code from the information terminal device of the viewer; a step of the prescribed reproduction device performing authentication based on the received prescribed password upon receiving the prescribed password from the viewer; and a step of the prescribed reproduction device starting the reproduction of the content recorded on the information recording medium when it judges that the received prescribed password is valid.

Here, it is preferable that a password management table associating the password with the prescribed acquisition code is recorded on the information recording medium, and the prescribed reproduction device presents a prescribed acquisition code corresponding to the random number generated according to a prescribed random function.

Further, it is preferable that the server computer comprises a viewing management database containing a table corresponding to the password management table, and by referring to the viewing management database, a prescribed password corresponding to the prescribed

acquisition code received from the information terminal device of the viewer is specified, and presented to the viewer.

Moreover, it is preferable that prescribed position information is recorded on the information recording medium, and the prescribed reproduction device presents the prescribed acquisition code together with the prescribed position information.

Further, it is preferable that the viewing management method further comprises a step of urging the viewer to select a viewing management target content before presenting the acquisition code, and when the viewing management target content is selected, the prescribed acquisition code corresponding to the selected viewing management target content is presented.

Moreover, the present invention according to the second perspective is an information recording medium readable with a prescribed reproduction device, wherein the information recording medium is used for recording a viewing management target content, a prescribed password management table and prescribed control information, a prescribed password is associated with a prescribed acquisition code in the prescribed password management table, and the prescribed control information causes the prescribed reproduction device to realize: a function of presenting the prescribed acquisition code to the viewer and urging the viewer to input the prescribed password, a function of, when the viewer inputs the prescribed password, performing authentication of the input prescribed password, and a function of reproducing the viewing management target content according to the result of the authentication.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Fig. 1 is a diagram for explaining the viewer management system for realizing the viewing management method according to an embodiment of the present invention;

5 Fig. 2 is a flowchart for explaining the flow of operation of the DVD player 11 according to an embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 3 is a diagram showing an example of the activation menu screen according to an embodiment of the present invention;

10 Fig. 4 is a diagram showing an example of the first viewer authentication screen according to an embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 5 is a diagram for explaining the password management table according to an embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 6 is a flowchart for explaining the flow of password acquisition processing according to an embodiment of the present invention;

15 Fig. 7 is a diagram showing an example of the second viewer authentication screen according to an embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 8 is a diagram showing an example of the acquisition code input screen according to an embodiment of the present invention;

20 Fig. 9 is a diagram for explaining an example of the data structure of the viewing management database according to an embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 10 is a diagram showing an example of the viewing confirmation screen according to an embodiment of the present invention; and

25 Fig. 11 is a diagram showing an example of the password presentation screen according to an embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILEDDESCRIPTION

Next, the embodiments of the present invention are now explained with reference to the drawings. In the following embodiment, although an
5 explanation is made employing a DVD media, there is no particular limitation, and the present invention can also be employed in other medias such as CD-ROMs or next-generation media.

Fig. 1 is a diagram for explaining the viewer management system for realizing the viewing management method according to the present
10 embodiment. As shown in Fig. 1, this system is constituted from a viewer system 1 on the viewer side for viewing the content recorded on a DVD media M, and a server computer 2 on the media provider side for distributing/providing the DVD media M to the viewer. The DVD media M has various settings for realizing the viewing management method
15 according to the present embodiment.

Specifically, this DVD media M is processed in advance during the production/manufacture process to enable the reproduction of contents only via a prescribed menu to prevent the viewing management target content from being directly reproduced. Control of this kind of
20 reproduction, for example, is able to employ the user operation control (UOP) under the DVD specification, and a setting of prohibiting the respective items of "chapter play", "skip play" and "time designation play" against the program chain (PGC) can be made. Further, direct access to content data from computers and the like will be prohibited. The DVD
25 media M subject to such settings will be able to reproduce contents only via a specified menu.

A viewer system 1 is typically constituted from a DVD player 11 for reproducing the DVD media M according to the DVD-Video, a display device 12 for outputting the signal reproduced with the DVD player 11 as images and sounds, and an information terminal device 13 owned by the viewer.

The DVD player 11 is equipped with a remote controller 11a as the user interface, and an interactive operating environment is provided to the viewer thereby. As a result of the viewer operating the remote controller 11a in relation to the visual contents displayed on the display device 12, such viewer is able to provide various instructions to the DVD player 11. However, the operation panel provided to the body of the DVD player 11 may be used instead of the remote controller 11a.

The information terminal device 13 typically corresponds to a mobile telephone capable of wireless communication, but another device may also be employed. For example, a general telephone capable of emitting a tone signal or a set top box having an interactive function in a digital television service may also be employed. Below, a mobile telephone as the information terminal device 13 will be explained as the example. The mobile telephone 13, in addition to an ordinary wireless telephone function, comprises an email function and Internet connection function. Typically, the mobile telephone 13 is able to exchange emails with a node (e.g., server computer 2) on the Internet via a gateway from a wireless telephone network, and access websites.

The server computer 2 assumes the core role for realizing the viewer management method according to the present embodiment. The server computer 2 performs member authentication processing and viewing

management processing to the viewer using the DVD media M. In order to perform such member authentication processing and viewing management processing, the server computer 2 comprises a database system corresponding thereto, and is organically linking such processes and database system. The detailed operation processing of the server computer 2 will be described later.

In the viewer management system constituted as described above, the schematic explanation of the processing flow of the viewer management method according to the present embodiment is as follows.

Incidentally, in addition to the foregoing reproduction regulation setting being made to the DVD media M employed in the viewer management method according to the present embodiment, programs and data for dynamically generating passwords and acquisition codes are also prestored in a prescribed area thereof. Special processing to be performed in this kind of DVD media M may be conducted with the authoring process during the manufacture of the DVD media.

Foremost, as shown in Fig. 1, when the viewer inserts the DVD media M into the DVD player 11, the DVD player 11 reads the disc control information recorded on the DVD media M, and displays the activation menu screen according to such disc control information on the display device 12 ((1) in Fig. 1). This activation menu screen is constituted including with menu items for the media provider to request authentication to the viewer regarding the viewing management target content.

The viewer uses the remote controller 11a to conduct an interactive operation to the presented activation menu screen so as to display a viewer authentication screen on the DVD player side (hereinafter referred

to as the "first viewer authentication screen") ((2) in Fig. 1). In this first viewer authentication screen, the viewer is shown an acquisition code, and is requested to input a corresponding password. This acquisition code is set to have different contents each time the viewer makes a content reproduction request. As a result, even in cases where a plurality of viewing management target contents recorded on the DVD media M, a different acquisition code for each reproduction request is presented to the respective contents, and the input of a different password for each case can be requested.

Here, as the result of the viewer accessing the server computer 2 from the mobile telephone 13 and providing the acquisition code, such viewer will be able to acquire a password in exchange therefor. In other words, the viewer uses the mobile telephone 13 to access the website (substantially the server computer 2) indicated by a URL shown on the first viewer authentication screen, inputs the user ID and password as well as the acquisition code shown on the first viewer authentication screen, and acquires the password required for viewing the content of DVD media M ((3) and (4) in Fig. 1). Incidentally, here, the viewer is registered in the server computer 2 as a member, and has previously acquired a prescribed user ID and password.

As described above, the viewer acquires the password from the server computer 2, and inputs the acquired password in the first viewer authentication screen ((5) of Fig. 1). And, the DVD player 11 performs authentication regarding the input password under the execution of the program recorded on the DVD media M, and, when it is judged that such password is valid, it starts the reproduction of the designated content.

Incidentally, when the DVD player 11 succeeds in the authentication regarding the input password, it is preferable that a flag to such effect is stored in the internal memory buffer, and such flag remains effective until the DVD media M is ejected.

5 As described above, in the present embodiment, upon reproducing a specified content recorded on a DVD media M, the viewer uses the mobile telephone 13 to access the server computer 2 on the Internet and acquire the password with the acquisition code shown on the first viewer authentication screen, and is urged to input such password. Thus, even if
10 it is a stand-alone DVD player 11 that does not have a network connection function, it is possible to manage the viewing of contents.

Fig. 2 is a flowchart for explaining the operation flow of the DVD player 11 according to the present embodiment. Incidentally, although the operation flow is explained sequentially for the sake of convenience below,
15 this is not limited thereto. Therefore, so as long as there is no contradiction with the operation, the processing order may be rearranged or performed in parallel.

In Fig. 2, when the viewer loads the DVD media M into the disc tray of the DVD player 11, the DVD player 11 loads the DVD media M in its
20 internal disc reproduction mechanism, reads the disc control information (STEP 201), displays the activation menu screen according to such disc control information on the display device 12, and requests the viewer to select the content to be reproduced (STEP 202).

Fig. 3 is a diagram showing an example of the activation menu
25 screen according to the present invention. In this activation menu screen, the viewer operates the remote controller 11a at hand to interactively

select one among the plurality of contents recorded on the DVD media M. In this example, "video 1" and "video 2" are viewing management target contents, and, with "video 1", the viewer is able to select "with preview" or "without preview".

5 When the viewer, for instance, selects the item of "video 1 (without preview)", which is a viewing management target content, from this activation menu screen (STEP 203 of Fig. 2), the DVD player 11 displays the first viewer authentication screen associated with the selected item, and requests the viewer to enter the password (STEP 204).

10 Fig. 4 is a diagram showing an example of the first viewer authentication screen according to the present embodiment. This first viewer authentication screen is constituted by including a URL 41 for showing the website to be accessed for acquiring the password, an acquisition code field 42 showing the acquisition code required in acquiring
15 the password, and a password input field 43 to which the password is to be input. In other words, the DVD player 11 dynamically and internally generates an acquisition code based on the disc control information of the DVD media M and according to the execution procedures prescribed therein, displays the first viewer authentication screen including the
20 generated acquisition code, and requests the input of the password corresponding to the acquisition code.

 In order to generation this acquisition code, for example, as shown in Fig. 5, a password management table which associates the password and acquisition code is registered in the DVD media M. Meanwhile, the
25 server computer 2 has a viewing management database containing a table with the same contents as this password table for conducting viewing

management employing this acquisition code.

The DVD player 11 generates a prescribed random number with the random generated function, which is an internally incorporated function, according to the execution procedures prescribed in the disc control
5 information, reads the acquisition code corresponding to such random number from the password table, and, as shown in Fig. 4, displays an acquisition code display field 42 of the first viewer authentication screen.

In a state where this first viewer authentication screen is being displayed, the viewer uses the mobile telephone 13 to access the website
10 indicated by the URL 41 of the first viewer authentication screen, and acquires the password via the required viewer authentication. Incidentally, the password acquisition processing will be described later.

When the viewer acquires the password via the prescribed operation procedures from the prescribed website, the viewer operates the
15 remote controller 11a to input the password in the password input field 43 of the first viewer authentication screen, and, for example, pushes the select button (STEP 205 of Fig. 2). When the DVD player 11 receives the password from the viewer, it compares this with the password corresponding to the acquisition code specified previously with the random
20 number registered in the password table, and judges whether the two passwords coincide (STEP 206). When the DVD player 11 judges that the password input from the viewer coincides with the password registered in the password table; that is, when it judges that the input password is valid, a flag showing the success of authentication is stored in the internal
25 memory buffer, and the reproduction of the content is started according to the disc control information (STEP 207). As a result, the viewer will be

able to view the viewing management target content that he/she wished to view. Here, it is preferable that the flag showing the success of authentication is stored in the internal memory buffer for each content since viewing will be managed for each viewing management target content.

Incidentally, when the DVD player 11 judges that the input password is not valid, it performs prescribed error processing (STEP 208), and compulsorily ends the processing. Here, instead of compulsorily ending the processing, the process may return to the activation menu screen.

Fig. 6 is a flowchart for explaining the flow of password acquisition processing according to the present embodiment. This password acquisition processing, as described above, is conducted between the mobile telephone 13 and server computer 2.

As shown in Fig. 6, when the viewer utilizes the Internet connection function of the mobile telephone 13 and accesses the website indicated by the URL 41 on the first viewer authentication screen; that is, accesses the server computer 2, the server computer 2 will respond thereto by displaying on the display unit of the mobile telephone 13 a viewer authentication screen on the mobile telephone side (hereinafter referred to as the "second viewer authentication screen") (STEP 601). Fig. 7 is a diagram showing an example of the second viewer authentication screen according to the present embodiment. Here, when reproducing the viewing management target content, it is necessary that the viewer be registered in advance as a member of the media provider that is providing such DVD media M. Thus, when the viewer has not yet performed member registration, the viewer will select the "new" button 71 on the

second viewer authentication screen to conduct member registration procedures (STEPS 602 and 603). As a result of the member registration procedures, the viewer will be assigned a viewer ID and password, and be registered in the database system of the server computer 2. Incidentally, in order to realize the charging processing to the viewer, for example, an effective credit card number or the like may be deposited. As this kind of member registration procedure/charging method, various publicly known methods may be employed, and the explanation thereof is omitted.

When the viewer inputs the ID and password that were personally assigned on the second viewer authentication screen, the mobile telephone 13 transmits the input contents to the server computer 2. The server computer 2 performs authentication based on the ID and password sent from the mobile telephone 13, and judges whether the viewer is a registered member or not (STEP 604). When the server computer 2 judges that the viewer is a registered member, the server computer 2 displays on the display unit of the mobile telephone 13 an acquisition code input screen (STEP 605). Incidentally, when the server computer 2 is not able to authenticate that the viewer is a registered member, it performs prescribed error processing and ends the routine (STEP 610).

Fig. 8 is a diagram showing an example of the acquisition code input screen according to the present embodiment. An acquisition code input field for inputting, for example, a 12 digit number is provided to the acquisition code input screen. When the viewer inputs the acquisition code in the acquisition code input field of the acquisition code input screen while referring to the first viewer authentication screen displayed with the DVD player 11 and selects the OK button, the mobile telephone 13

transmits the input contents to the server computer 2. When the server computer 2 receives an acquisition code from an authenticated mobile telephone 13, it refers to the viewing management database system, specifies the contents and viewing conditions (viewing period, price, etc.) of the viewing management target content corresponding to such acquisition code, and displays on the display unit of the mobile telephone 13 the viewing confirmation screen showing such items (STEP 606). Specifically, the server computer 2 refers to the viewing management database, and, foremost acquires the viewing period on the one hand, acquires the current date and time with the clock function on the other, and judges whether the current date and time are within the range of the viewing period. And, when the server computer 2 judges that the current date and time are within the range of the viewing period, it generates a viewing confirmation screen according to the contents of other fields in relation to the acquisition code, and sends this to the mobile telephone 13.

Fig. 9 is a diagram for explaining an example of the data structure of the viewing management database of the server computer 2 according to the present embodiment. This viewing management database is used when the server computer 2 conducts the viewing management of contents for the viewer.

As shown in Fig. 9, the respective records of the viewing management database, for example are constituted from the respective fields of acquisition code 91, password 92, title 93, period 94 and price 95. The respective fields of the acquisition code 91 and password 92 are the same as the contents of the password table recorded in the DVD media to be distributed or provided. The title field 93 shows the title of the content,

and the period field 94 and fee field 95 show the viewable period (e.g., from when to when) and the viewing fee of the respective contents. In other words, from the perspective of the media provider, it is possible to comprehend the content from the acquisition code, and manage the viewing period and viewing fee of such content.

Fig. 10 is a diagram showing an example of the viewing confirmation screen according to the present embodiment. When the viewer selects the OK button on this viewing confirmation screen, for example, (STEP 607), the server computer 2 displays the password presentation screen as illustrated in Fig. 11 on the display unit of the mobile telephone 13 (STEP 608 and 609). Here, the server computer 2 charges the viewer for the viewing fee of such content.

Incidentally, as described above, when the DVD media M is ejected, the DVD player 11 will reset the authentication success flag stored for each content in the internal memory buffer, and the viewer will be required to reacquire the password. Here, when the viewer requests for the reacquisition of the password during the viewing period in the server computer 2, it is preferable that the password presentation screen is simply provided, and charging processing is not performed again to such viewer.

As described above, when the viewer uses the mobile telephone 13 and acquires the password, the user then inputs such password in the password input field 43 of the first viewer authentication screen. Thereby, the DVD player 11 will start the reproduction of the viewing management target content.

As described above, according to the present embodiment, upon reproducing a specified content recorded on the DVD media M, the viewer

uses the mobile telephone 13 to access the server computer 2 on the Internet and acquire the password with the acquisition code shown on the first viewer authentication screen, and is urged to input such password. Thus, even if it is a stand-alone DVD player 11 that does not have a network connection function, it is possible to manage the viewing of contents.

The foregoing embodiments are exemplifications for explaining the present invention, and the present invention shall not be limited to such embodiments in any way. The present invention may be worked in various forms so as long as the gist hereof is not deviated.

For example, in the present embodiment, although a mobile telephone having an Internet connection function was explained as an example of a portable information terminal device 13, this is not limited thereto. For example, when using an ordinary telephone, the acquisition code and password may be exchanged by conducting an audio-based interactive operation with an audio response system. Further, in the case of a set top box having an interactive function, the acquisition code and password may be exchanged with an interactive operation in relation to a specified data broadcast program.

According to the present invention, provided is a viewing management function in a simple manner while giving consideration to the compatibility with existing visual reproduction devices.

(First Embodiment)

Embodiments of the present invention will be described below with reference to the attached figures. Fig. 1 is a diagram which is

used to illustrate the role of an information processing system constituting a first embodiment of the present invention.

As is shown in Fig. 1, the information processing system 1 of the present invention provides reference information for the respective phases that constitute a supply chain, e. g., product planning phase, product development phase, production preparation (design) phase, production phase, shipping phase, marketing phase and the like, or refers to information in the respective phases, and thus acts to support SCM in connection with the respective phases.

Fig. 2 is a block diagram which shows the construction of the information processing system 1. As is shown in Fig. 2, the information processing system comprises MD map memory means 10, attribute map memory means 11, IF (interface) means 12, control means 13 and the like. Furthermore, the information processing system 1 is construction so that communication is possible with the respective systems involved in the supply chain, e. g., product planning system, product development system, production preparation (design) system, production system, shipping system, marketing system and the like via a communications network (LAN, internet, dedicated line, packet communications network or any combination of these, including both communication by wire and wireless communication).

It is sufficient if the information processing system 1 comprises the respective means described above; in physical terms, this system may be either a dedicated system or an all-purpose information processing device. For example, the information processing system of the present invention can be realized in an information processing device of

common construction comprising a processing device, input means, memory means and output means by operating software that regulates the respective processing operations performed in the information processing method of the present invention. Furthermore, the abovementioned
5 dedicated system or information processing device may be constructed by a single computer, or may be constructed by a plurality of computers that are dispersed on a network.

In the present invention, the types of merchandise that are handled can be determined in accordance with the design of the system;
10 in the present embodiment, a case in which articles of clothing are handled will be described as an example.

The MD map memory means 10 store merchandise control information (hereafter referred to as an "MD map" (merchandising map)) that specifies the merchandise assortment in each retail shop in
15 correspondence with each retail shop (see Fig. 3 (a)).

The retail shops that correspond to the MD map can be set as model retail shops arranged by scale, such as large scale, medium scale and small scale. In this case, concrete MD map for each retail shop is set on the basis of the MD map for a model retail shop selected in
20 accordance with the scale of this retail shop. Subsequently, the MD map memory means 10 stores MD maps for respective model retail shops.

As is shown in Fig. 3 (a), each MD map is set for a specified time period (one year in the example shown in the figure), and is divided into specified time period units, and is controlled with that units. The
25 specified time period units may be set in accordance with merchandise cycles; for example, in cases where articles of clothing are the object of

management, the time period units might conceivably be set as weekly units. Below, MD map that is divided into specified time period units will be referred to as unit MD map.

Furthermore, the concept of an MD cycle may also be introduced (see Fig. 3 (b)). The period of this MD cycle is set on the basis of (for example) sales or marketing trends, seasons and the like so that the cycle includes one unit MD map or a plurality of unit MD maps that are continuous in the time direction. The period of this MD cycle can be freely set in accordance with merchandise characteristics and the like, and may be different for each model retail shop or MD cycle.

The unit MD map contains merchandise quantities and merchandise data for the merchandise disposed in the model retail shop in the abovementioned divided periods as information that specifies the merchandise assortments in the model retail shop. However, since the merchandise quantities are determined in accordance with the capacities of the model retail shop (as will be described later), unit MD maps that are assigned to the same model retail shop will as a rule contain the same merchandise quantities. Accordingly, a data structure in which merchandise quantities are caused to correspond to model retail shops may also be used.

In cases where a model retail shop has a plurality of merchandise disposition spaces, unit MD map is constructed so that the merchandise quantities and merchandise data are caused to correspond to the respective merchandise disposition spaces of the model retail shop (see Fig. 4 (a)). For example, the merchandise disposition spaces are shop furnishing units such as racks or the like; a plurality of such shop

furnishing units may be combined and set as a single merchandise disposition space. In the example shown in Fig. 4 (a), the system is constructed so that merchandise quantities and merchandise data correspond to each of five merchandise disposition spaces, i. e., shop
5 furnishing units 1 through 3, shop furnishing units 4 and 5, shop furnishing unit 6, shop furnishing unit 7 and shop furnishing unit 8.

The merchandise data is information that is used to specify merchandise, and is constructed from a plurality of attributes. For example, conceivable attributes of the merchandise data for articles of
10 clothing include theme, product type (item), material, color, size and the like. Among these, theme attributes are attributes that express the direction and concept of product development, e. g., such attributes adopt attribute values such as ON (formal) OFF (casual), BRIDAL and the like. Furthermore, item attributes are attributes that express the type of clothing,
15 e. g., such attributes adopt attribute values such as pullover (PO), jacket (JK) and the like. In cases where merchandise of a highly thematic nature such as clothing and sundries or the like are the object of the system, it is desirable that at least the theme be provided as an attribute.

Attributes such as theme and the like can be constructed in
20 a hierarchical manner in accordance with the timing used to determine the attribute values. The term "hierarchy" refers to a data structure in which a plurality of attributes of subordinate hierarchical ranking correspond to each attribute of superior hierarchical ranking. For example, in cases where specifications are determined so that [i] the theme is determined
25 using a first timing, [ii] the material is determined using a second timing following the first timing, and [iii] color and size are determined using a

third timing following the second timing, a data structure is produced in which a plurality of materials correspond to one theme, and a plurality of colors and sizes correspond to one material.

Furthermore, the item attributes are controlled in accordance
5 with a data structure in which the theme attributes are given a superior hierarchical ranking in the same manner as in the case of the material attributes, and a plurality of items correspond to one theme. Accordingly, as in the case of the material attributes, these item attributes are as a rule determined following the first timing. However, since the item attribute
10 values are determined with the item ratios considered from the standpoint of a profit indicator (as will be described later), it would also be possible to construct the system so that the item attributes are determined prior to the first timing.

In cases where the attributes are determined as described
15 above, the data structures of the unit MD map are as shown in Figs. 4 (a) through 4 (c) (in conceptual terms). The matrix cell (shaded portion) shown in Fig. 4 (b) corresponds to the so-called "type" in articles of clothing, while the matrix cell (shaded portion) shown in Fig. 4 (c) corresponds to the so-called "SKU (stock keeping unit)" in articles of
20 clothing.

In the present embodiment, as will be described later, the fact that attribute values are determined using different timings so that the MD map (unit MD map) is completed in a step by step manner is one of the characterizing features of the system. The data structure shown for
25 example in Fig. 4 is one data structure that is suitable for realizing such a characterizing feature.

Furthermore, a conventional data base technique such as a relational data base or the like can be used for the control and retrieval of data in the MD map memory means 10.

5 The attribute map memory means 11 stores attribute maps for specified attributes of the merchandise data in correspondence with the MD maps of the respective model retail shops. These attribute maps express trends in attributes in the time direction, and are constructed so that the attribute values are caused to correspond to the time axis.

10 In cases where MD map is constructed for each merchandise disposition space, the attribute maps are similarly constructed so that these maps are caused to correspond to the respective merchandise disposition spaces. Furthermore, in cases where there are attributes with a superior hierarchical ranking, the attribute maps are restricted by the attribute maps of such superior attributes, and are constructed so that
15 these maps are divided according to each attribute value of such superior attributes. Examples of these respective attribute maps are shown in Fig. 5. As is clear from this figure, the material attribute map is constructed so that this map is divided for each of the attribute values of the theme attribute, which is superior attribute in terms of hierarchical ranking.

20 the IF means 12 are constructed so that information can be input and output with respect to the various systems and the information processing means 100 via a communications network, in addition to input device such as a keyboard or the like and output device such as a display, printer or the like. For example, the IF means 12 comprise a
25 communications module such as a PPP driver, TCP/IP driver or the like.

The information process means 100 are constructed so that

these means receive input from the user utilizing this information processing system, and output information to this user. An ordinary personal computer or portable terminal owned by the user can be used as the information processing means 100. Furthermore, the information processing means 100 may be constructed so that these means form a part of the present information processing system 1, or may be constructed as an external information processing device.

The control means 13 receive various types of input from the user via the information processing means 100 and respective systems, and perform MD map initial setting processing, MD map updating processing (theme setting processing, item setting processing, material setting processing, color/size setting processing and the like), MD map checking processing (balance checking processing, profit indicator checking processing and the like), reference information input-output processing and the like. In Fig. 2, the abovementioned respective types of processing that are performed in the control means 13 are shown as respective functional means.

The control means 13 output screen information for menu displays to the user who has accessed this information processing system 1. The user can select various types of processing on the basis of such screen information, and can send requests for the execution of this processing to the information processing system 1.

The respective types of processing shown in Fig. 2 will be described below. Furthermore, the respective steps can be performed in an arbitrarily altered order as long as this causes no conflict in the content of the processing.

(MD Map Initial Setting Processing: Fig. 6)

The “MD map initial setting processing” refers to processing which determines the quantities of merchandise disposed in a retail shop in accordance with the capacities of this retail shop, and which initially sets the MD map for this retail shop so that such merchandise quantities are included in these MD map. In the present embodiment, the MD map initial setting processing performs the initial setting of MD maps for respective model retail shops.

First, the control means 13 ensure the availability of fixed-time-period memory regions used to store MD maps in the MD map memory means 10 for the respective model retail shops. The MD map memory regions are divided on the basis of predetermined time period units (e. g., weekly units) so that unit MD map memory regions are ensured (S100). Here, the time period units can be set by the user, and may be set individually for each model retail shop or MD map.

As a result, the MD map memory means 10 are constructed as shown in Fig. 3 (a), and the control means 13 can access (control) the MD map for each model retail shop in such divided time period units (i. e., by each individual unit MD map).

Next, on the basis of input from the user, the control means 13 determine the MD cycle for each MD map so that one or a plurality of unit MD maps that are continuous in the time direction are included in this MD cycle (S101). Several MD cycles may be determined for one MD map, and the time periods may be different for each MD cycle.

As a result, the MD map memory means 10 are constructed

as shown in Fig. 3 (b), and the control means 13 can access (control) the MD map for the each model retail shop by each individual MD cycle.

Next, for each model retail shop, the control means 13 receive the capacity of this model retail shop from the outside (S102).

5 The "capacity" of a retail shop is information that specifies the volume of merchandise disposition space in the retail shop. For example, in the case of a retail shop that handles articles of clothing, the merchandise disposition space is specified in terms of shop furnishing units; accordingly, the number of shop furnishing units and the size of the
10 respective shop furnishing units correspond to the capacity. Fig. 7 (a) shows an example of this capacity. In this example, the size of the shop furnishing units is specified by the length of these shop furnishing units in the horizontal direction.

 The capacity of a model retail shop may be input into the
15 present information processing system 1 by the user, or may be acquired from an outside data base, e. g., a retail shop design data base or the like (not shown in the figures). In cases where the user inputs this capacity, the input-output means of the information processing means 100 or the like are constructed so that (for example) an input screen is displayed on a
20 display device, and the user is caused to input the necessary information by means of a conversational format.

 Next, on the basis of a predetermined merchandise disposition pitch, the control means 13 calculate the quantity of merchandise that can be disposed in the abovementioned capacity that has
25 been received (S103). Here, the merchandise disposition pitch can be set by the user, and can be set individually for each model retail shop, and

further for each merchandise disposition space. Furthermore, the system may also be constructed so that a plurality of merchandise disposition spaces are formed into a group, and the quantity of merchandise is calculated with this group taken as a single merchandise disposition space.

5 For instance, Fig. 7 (b) shows an example of the calculation of the quantity of merchandise in a case where a capacity such as that shown in Fig. 7 (a) is received. In this example, shop furnishing units 1 through 3 and shop furnishing units 4 and 5 are respectively formed into groups. Furthermore, since the size of the shop furnishing units is
10 specified by the horizontal length of these shop furnishing units, the merchandise disposition pitch is also set as the horizontal pitch. As is seen from this figure, the quantities of merchandise that can be disposed in the respective merchandise disposition spaces can be determined by respective INTEGER values of (sum of horizontal lengths with one
15 group/horizontal pitch of merchandise disposition).

Next, the control means 13 refer to the MD map memory means 10, and perform initial setting of the MD maps by storing the abovementioned determined merchandise quantities in the MD map (respective unit MD map) for each model retail shop, with these
20 merchandise quantities being caused to correspond to the respective merchandise disposition spaces (S104).

Thus, in the present embodiment, among the information that constitutes the MD map, merchandise quantities are determined in the initial setting stage in accordance with the capacities of the model retail
25 shop, while merchandise data is not determined in the initial setting stage, but is rather determined in stages in the MD map updating processing

(described later).

(MD Map Updating Processing)

The “MD map updating processing” is processing that
5 updates the MD map that are set for each retail shop by adding or
correcting merchandise data for the merchandise that is disposed in this
retail shop. In the present embodiment, the MD map updating processing
updates MD maps for respective model retail shops.

Here, the “addition of merchandise data” refers to the
10 determination of the attribute values of attributes that constitute the
merchandise data, and the storage of these attribute values in the MD map.
Furthermore, the “correction of merchandise data” refers to the alteration
of attribute values that are already stored in the MD map.

In the MD map updating processing, the attribute values of
15 respective attributes are determined in stages (step by step) using a
plurality of different timings. In the present embodiment, the system is
constructed so that the attribute values are determined in stages in the
order “theme, item, material, color/size” using arbitrary timings from the
product planning phase to the production phase in the supply chain.
20 Since the present embodiment deals with articles of clothing, which are
highly thematic, the timing (order) in which the attribute values are
determined is set so that the updating of the MD map is theme-driven.

Below, the MD map updating process will be described for
each attribute. Furthermore, when the respective processing operations
25 described below are performed, it is assumed that the MD map that is the
object of updating is selected by the user.

(MD Map Updating Processing: Theme Setting Processing: Fig. 8)

In cases where the theme setting is selected by the user, the control means 13 display an input screen for the theme attribute map via the image processing means 100 or the like (S200). In this case, the control means 13 refer to the MD map memory means 10, ascertain how the merchandise disposition spaces, MD cycles and the like have been set in the MD map that is the object of updating, and set the input screen so that one or more theme attribute values are received for each merchandise disposition space. Furthermore, the MD cycles are displayed so that the user can refer to these cycles when the user inputs information.

On the basis of this input screen, the user can assign themes to each merchandise disposition space on the time axis while considering the relationships of themes to merchandise disposition spaces and MD cycles (market trends, sales trends and the like). In this case, furthermore, it is not absolutely necessary to assign themes that are closed within the MD cycles; themes may also be assigned so that these themes extend across a plurality of MD cycles.

On the basis of the input from the user, the control means 13 determine the theme attribute map, and store this map in the attribute map memory means 11 in correspondence with the MD map that is the object of updating (S201).

Next, the control means 13 match the time axis of the MD map that is the object of updating with the time axes of the abovementioned determined theme attribute map (S202). Then, for each

unit MD map contained in the MD map that is the object of updating, theme attribute values that are set on the same time axis as these unit MD maps in the theme attribute map are selected for each merchandise disposition space (S203). Furthermore, the respective selected theme attribute values are added to the respective unit MD maps as attribute values of merchandise data for each merchandise disposition space (S204).

Furthermore, matching with the time axis of the theme attribute map is obtained for the material attribute map, so that the theme attribute values set in the theme attribute map are reflected in the material attribute map (S205).

(MD Map Updating Processing: Item Setting Processing: Fig. 9)

In case where the item setting is selected by the user, the control means 13 receive item ratios for each MD cycle from the user via the information processing means 100 or the like (S300). The item ratios can be specified by the proportions of the respective item attribute values, e. g., (PO = 30%, JK = 20%, ...).

Here, instead of receiving item ratios for each MD cycle, it would also be possible to construct the system so that (for example) the item ratios for the next MD cycle are automatically set using the item ratios used in the previous MD cycle as a reference.

Furthermore, it would also be possible to construct the system so that item ratios for each MD cycle are calculated on the basis of profit target values such as CFROI (cash flow return on investment) or the like, past marketing results, business plans or the like, and to provide these values to the user as default values or reference values.

Furthermore, it would also be possible to construct the system so that a check is made on the basis of the received item ratios and mean profit per item as to whether or not the profit target values can be achieved in a case where these item ratios are used.

5 Next, the control means 13 refer to the MD map that is the object of updating and acquire the merchandise quantities that are stored in each merchandise disposition space; the control means 13 then multiply these values by item ratios for the respective MD cycles, thus determining combination of item attribute values and merchandise
10 quantities (for example, {(PO, 60), (JK, 40), ...}) for each merchandise disposition space and each MD cycle (S301).

Then, to each of the unit MD maps of the MD map that is the object of updating, the combination of item attribute values and merchandise quantities determined in S301 in connection with the MD
15 cycle containing this unit MD map is added as merchandise data attribute values for each merchandise disposition space (S302) (see Fig. 4 (b)).

(MD Map Updating Processing: Material Setting Processing: Fig.
10)

20 In cases where the material setting is selected by the user, the control means 13 refer to the attribute map memory means 11, and make a judgement as to whether or not corresponding theme attribute map has been set (S400). In cases where corresponding theme attribute map has not been set, the control means 13 output a message or the like to the
25 user so that corresponding theme attribute map is first set. In the present embodiment, the timing at which the material attributes are determined is

set as a timing that is later than the timing at which the theme attributes are determined.

On the other hand, in cases where corresponding theme attribute map has already been set, a material attribute map input screen is
5 displayed by the information processing means 100 or the like (S401). In this case, the control means 13 refer to the MD map memory means 10, ascertain how the merchandise disposition spaces and MD cycles have been set in the MD map that is the object of updating, and set the input screen so that one or more material attribute values are received for each
10 merchandise disposition space. Furthermore, the MD cycles are displayed so that the user can refer to these cycles when inputting information.

On the basis of such an input screen, the user can assign materials to each merchandise disposition space on the time axis while
15 considering the relationships of materials to merchandise disposition spaces, MD cycles, themes and the like. In this case, furthermore, it is not absolutely necessary to assign materials that are closed within the MD cycles; materials may also be assigned so that these materials extend across a plurality of MD cycles. However, since there is a hierarchical
20 relationship between theme attributes and material attributes, the user must assign material attribute values so that these values are closed within the theme attribute values.

The control means 13 determine the material attribute map on the basis of the input from the user, and store this material attribute
25 map in the map attribute memory means 11 in correspondence with the MD map that is the object of updating (S402).

Next, for each MD map that is the object of updating, the control means 13 match the time axis of the MD map that is the object of updating with the time axes of the abovementioned determined material attribute map (S403). Then, for each unit MD map, materials that
5 are set on the same time axis as this unit MD map are respectively selected for each merchandise disposition space (S404). Furthermore, for each unit MD map that is the object of updating, the abovementioned respectively selected material attribute values are added as merchandise data attribute values to each merchandise disposition space (S405).

10

(MD Map Updating Processing: Color/Size Setting Processing)

In cases where the user selects the color/size setting, the control means 13 refer to the attribute map means 11, and make a judgement as to whether or not corresponding material attribute map has
15 been set. In cases where such corresponding map has not been set, the control means 13 output a message or the like to the user so that corresponding material attribute map is first set. The reason for this is that in the present embodiment, the timing at which color attributes and size attributes are determined is set as a timing that is later than the timing
20 at which material attributes are determined.

On the other hand, in cases where corresponding material attribute map has already been set, the control means 13 refer to the MD map memory means 10, read out the unit MD map selected by the user (among the unit MD maps contained in the MD map that is the object of
25 updating), and display a color/size attribute input screen using the information processing means 100 or the like for each combination of

theme attribute values, item attribute values and material attribute values.

On the basis of this display screen, the user can determine variations in color and size while considering the relationships of these factors to merchandise disposition spaces, MD cycles, themes, items,
5 materials and the like.

Next, the control means 13 add the color attribute values and size attribute values determined by the user to the unit MD map selected by the user as merchandise data attribute values for each merchandise disposition space. When the attribute values of these color
10 attributes and size attributes are added, the unit MD maps are completed.

Furthermore, the MD map updating processing includes correction processing (MD map correction) that updates attribute values that are already stored in the MD map; such correction processing will be described later.

15

(MD Map Checking Processing)

“MD map checking processing” is processing that performs a balance check that verifies the attribute value balance of the attributes of the merchandise data, a profit indicator check that verifies whether or not
20 the profit target values can be achieved, and the like, for the updated MD maps.

The control means 13 verify the attribute value balance for the three attributes of item, color and size at the timing at which the MD maps are updated (or at a preset timing such as the time at which the MD
25 maps are completed or the like). In concrete terms, the control means 13 create a histogram of the item attribute values, color attribute values and

size attribute values for each unit MD map on the basis of the merchandise data contained in this unit MD map, and determine the degree of bias on the basis of this histogram. Then, in cases where this degree of bias exceeds a preset reference value, the user is notified of this fact.

5 Furthermore, the user can set the reference value of the degree of bias, and this reference value can be set separately for each model retail shop and MD map, and for each attribute.

Furthermore, the control means 13 also verify whether or not the profit target values can be achieved in cases where production,
10 marketing or the like is performed on the basis of the MD maps, with this verification being performed at the timing at which prices are set as attributes of the merchandise data in the MD maps (this timing may conceivably be (for example) the same timing as the timing at which color/size attributes are determined), or at a preset timing such as the time
15 at which the MD maps are completed or the like. In concrete terms, the total profits obtained in cases where production, marketing or the like is performed on the basis of the MD maps for all retail shops is calculated for a specified calculation period (e. g., quarterly), and a profit indicator such as CFROI is determined on the basis of these values. In cases where this
20 profit indicator falls below a certain preset reference value, the user is notified of this fact. Furthermore, the reference value for the profit indicator can be set by the user, or be set automatically by using planning target values, which may be received from a management planning supporting system or the like.

25

(Reference Information Input-Output Processing)

“Reference information output processing” is processing that outputs reference information for specified phases constituting the supply chain on the basis of the MD maps set for the respective model retail shops. Furthermore, “reference information input processing” is processing that receives reference information used to update the MD maps from specified phases that constitute the supply chain.

(Input-Output of Reference Information for Development Phase)

For example, the development phase/production preparation (design) phase are conceivable as phases for which reference information is input and output. The development phase/production preparation (design) phase are phases in which work such as the preparation of designs, paper patterns, samples and the like is performed as a pre-process leading up to actual production. In such phases, a production preparation system or the like which is used to unify information concerning raw materials and auxiliary materials, and which has the function of controlling the respective processes up to the point of sample completion, and the function of converting the substance of merchandise processing plans into data, operates as a system that is used to realize SCM.

The development phase/production preparation (design) phase are positioned relatively high on the upstream side in the supply chain; accordingly, there is a highly urgent need for the early acquisition of information indicating what kind of merchandise should be produced, and when this merchandise should be produced.

In the present embodiment, in consideration of such points,

the processing is constructed so that reference information based on the MD maps is output to the production preparation system or the like (for example) at the first timing (i. e., the stage in which themes or items are confirmed), or at the latest at the second timing (i. e., in the stage in which materials are confirmed). Furthermore, the processing is constructed so that information concerning determined designs and samples, raw materials, auxiliary materials and the like is received from the production preparation system.

By using such a construction, it is possible for the production preparation system or the like to acquire merchandise data attributes such as themes, items and materials, that are important for development and design, in a stage that precedes the complete confirmation of the merchandise data, so that the development phase/production preparation (design) phase can be caused to proceed by so-called advance reading. Furthermore, by receiving information concerning designs and samples, raw materials, auxiliary materials and the like from the production preparation system or the like, it is possible to use this information as reference information for updating the MD maps.

(Input-Output of Reference Information for Production Phase)

For example, the production phase is conceivable as another phase for which reference information is input and output. The production phase is a phase in which provision of raw materials and auxiliary materials, control of raw material warehousing, designation and control of production, designation of shipping and the like are performed. In such a phase, a production designation system or the like which has the function

of predicting raw material order quantities and the like operates as a system that is used to realize SCM.

In a conventional production phase, production plans are established on the basis of the experience and the like of the parties
5 involved, and the provision of raw materials and the like and designation of production and the like are performed in accordance with these production plans. However, since there are no definite criteria for determining production quantities in the production plans, there are many cases in which excessive amounts of raw materials and the like are prepared, and
10 excessive amounts of production are designated.

In the present embodiment, in consideration of such points, the processing is constructed so that reference information is output to the production designation system or the like on the basis of the MD maps. Furthermore, the processing is constructed so that information such as
15 designated production quantities, delivery dates and the like are received from the production designation system or the like.

In this case, in the production designation system or the like, merchandise assortments in the retail shops can be utilized as a reference for determining production quantities; for example, the production phase
20 can be caused to proceed in an appropriate manner so that the amounts of raw materials and the like that are required in order to maintain the merchandise assortments in the respective retail shops for a specified period of time are prepared, and so that the required production is similarly designated. Furthermore, by receiving information concerning designated
25 production quantities, delivery dates and the like, it is possible (for example) to confirm production quantities in the MD maps.

Furthermore, in cases where reference information is output after the stage in which materials and the like are confirmed (second timing), the provision of raw materials and the like can be performed by advance reading in the production designation system or the like in the same manner as in the production preparation system or the like. As a result, the lead time can be shortened.

(Input-Output of Reference Information in Shipping Phase)

For example, the shipping phase is conceivable as another phase for which reference information is input and output. The shipping phase is a phase in which the shipping of produced merchandise from DC (distribution centers) to retail shops, the shipping of such merchandise from retail shops to DC, and the shipping of merchandise between retail shops or the like is performed. In such a phase, a shipping system or the like which has a warehousing control function, a shipping routing function and the like operates as a system that is used to realize SCM.

In a conventional shipping phase, merchandise distribution involving the questions of what to dispose in which retail shops is performed with consideration being given to the scale and the like of the respective retail shops only in the shipping phase, i. e., in the stage in which production of the merchandise has been completed. Accordingly, distribution plans that achieve a balanced distribution of merchandise to the respective retail shops must be established in the shipping phase, so that the lead time from the completion of production to the actual shipping to the retail shops is prolonged.

In the present embodiment, in consideration of such points,

the processing is constructed so that completed MD maps are output to the shipping system or the like as reference information. Furthermore, the processing is constructed so that information concerning excessive quantities or insufficient quantities of merchandise or the like for each retail shop is received from the shipping system or the like.

In this case, since the completed MD maps confirm the merchandise assortments in the retail shops, merchandise distribution/return/replenishment can as a rule be performed on the basis of the MD maps in the shipping system or the like, so that there is no need for the establishment of a revised distribution plan. As a result, the shipping phase can be caused to proceed quickly and efficiently. Furthermore, by receiving information concerning excessive quantities or insufficient quantities of merchandise or the like for each retail shop from the shipping system or the like, it is possible to confirm the conditions of the merchandise assortments in the respective retail shops.

(Effect of Reference Information Input-Output Processing)

Thus, in the present embodiment, since the system is constructed so that reference information based on MD maps that specify the merchandise assortments in the retail shops is output for the respective phases that constitute the supply chain, SCM can be performed while taking into account the merchandise assortments in the respective retail shops in each phase.

In particular, since the MD map include the quantities of merchandise that are disposed in the retail shop, and since these merchandise quantities are determined in accordance with the capacities of

the retail shop in the initial setting of the MD map, SCM can be performed with constant consideration being given to the physical restrictions of capacity by referring to the MD map in the respective phases.

Furthermore, since the MD map is constructed so that this
5 map is divided into unit MD maps in specified time period units, and so that merchandise data can be added to each unit MD map, it is possible to control the merchandise assortments in the retail shop in a dynamic manner even in cases where the fluctuation period of the merchandise cycle is short by setting the time period units in accordance with the
10 merchandise cycle. As a result, SCM can be performed in a dynamic manner in accordance with the merchandise cycle in all phases by referring to the unit MD maps.

Furthermore, since the merchandise attributes in the MD map are determined in stages following the initial setting of the MD map,
15 reference can be made to the merchandise assortments in the retail shop at various levels and various timings in the respective phases, from the timing at which superior-level attributes (e. g., theme or the like) are determined to the timing at which subordinate-level attributes (e. g., color, size or the like) are determined, so that SCM can be efficiently performed
20 by performing advance reading or the like.

(Correction of MD Map)

The MD map updating processing is constructed so that the attribute values of respective attributes can be corrected according to
25 conditions even after these attribute values have been tentatively determined. This is done in order to allow flexible alteration of the supply

chain in cases where the future merchandise assortments in the retail shop are altered on the basis of (for example) sales information or the like obtained from the marketing phase.

Here, we will consider, on the basis of information obtained
 5 from the marketing phase at the point in time of the n th week, e. g., sales information or the like for the n th week, the alteration of the future merchandise assortments in retail shop, i. e., the correction of unit MD map from the $(n + 1)$ st week on. Here, for example, in a case where the unit MD map for the $(n + 8)$ th week are corrected on the basis of sales
 10 information or the like for the n th week, there is a time margin of eight weeks; accordingly, even if attributes of a superior hierarchical ranking such as theme or the like are corrected, there is a high possibility that this can be handled in the production phase or the like. However, in a case where the unit MD map of the following $(n + 1)$ st week are corrected on the
 15 basis of sales information for the n th week, the correction content that can be handled within a time period of one week is limited if the lead time for raw material provision, production and the like is taken into consideration.

Accordingly, in the present embodiment, the MD map updating processing is constructed so that the correction content is
 20 controlled in accordance with a time interval $(x - n)$ in cases where the unit MD map for the x th week are corrected on the basis of sales information or the like for the n th week. In concrete terms, attributes of a higher hierarchical ranking can be corrected as $(x - n)$ increases, i. e., as the available time margin increases.

25 For example, the system is arranged so that attributes ranging from theme attributes to color/size attributes can be corrected in

cases where $(x - n) > t_1$, so that attributes ranging from item attributes to color/size attributes can be corrected in cases where $t_1 \leq (x - n) > t_2$, so that attributes ranging from material attributes to color/size attributes can be corrected in cases where $t_2 \leq (x - n) > t_3$, and so that only color/size attributes can be corrected in cases where $t_3 \leq (x - n)$. t_1 through t_3 can be set in accordance with the characteristics of the merchandise and the lead time for production and the like (see Fig. 11).

In this case, furthermore, the reference information input-output processing can also be constructed so that the phase for which reference information is output can be controlled in accordance with the time interval $(x - n)$ for each unit MD map when reference information based on the MD map is output (see Fig. 12).

In concrete terms, the processing is constructed so that in a case where the current point in time is the n th week, reference information based on the unit MD map for the x th week can also be output for upstream phases such as the product development phase and production preparation (design) phase as the time interval $(x - n)$ increases. On the other hand, the processing is constructed so that in cases where the time interval $(x - n)$ is small, reference information based on the unit MD map for the x th week can be output for midstream to downstream phases such as the production phase, shipping phase and marketing phase.

In the example shown in Fig. 12, the system is constructed so that the product planning phase or product development phase is selected and reference information is output in cases where $(x - n) > t_1$, so that the product development phase or production preparation (design) phase is selected and reference information is output in cases where $t_1 \leq$

$(x - n) > t_2$, so that the production preparation (design) phase or production phase is selected and reference information is output in cases where $t_2 \leq (x - n) > t_3$, and so that the production phase or shipping phase is selected and reference information is output in cases where $t_3 \leq (x - n)$.

5 However, the construction shown in Fig. 12 is merely an example; the correction content of the MD maps and the output destination phase can be adjusted in accordance with the design. Fig. 13 shows the relationship that should be satisfied by the time interval, MD map correction content and output destination phase.

10 As a result of the use of such a construction, the systems of the respective phases can receive a correction content that can be handled in a timely manner, and receive this correction content at an appropriate timing. Accordingly, the merchandise assortments in retail shop can be controlled in a dynamic manner even in the case of business conditions in
15 which demand is highly volatile, or business conditions involving merchandise of a high thematic or suppositional nature.

(Other)

A recording medium on which an information processing
20 program is recorded is conceivable as another embodiment of the present invention. A CD-ROM, magnetic disk, semiconductor memory or some other recording medium can be used as such a recording medium.

The information processing program is read into a data
25 processing device from this recording medium, and controls the operation of this data processing device. As a result of the control effected by this

information processing program, the data processing device performs processing that is the same as the processing of the MD map memory means 10 and control means 13 (MD map initial setting processing, MD map updating processing, reference information input-output processing and the like) in the abovementioned embodiment of the present invention.

Furthermore, the present invention is not limited to the abovementioned embodiment, but can be used with various modifications.

For example, the embodiment described above is constructed so that respective processing operations are performed for model retail shops; however, it would also be possible to construct the system so that respective processing operations are performed for respective individual retail shops. Furthermore, it would also be possible to construct the system so that (for example) MD maps are determined by performing MD map initial setting processing and MD map updating processing for model retail shops, and MD map for each concrete retail shop is set on the basis of MD map for a model retail shop that are selected in accordance with the scale of this concrete retail shop. In this case, it is also conceivable that the system might be constructed so that MD map checking processing and reference information input-output processing are performed on the basis of MD maps for individual retail shops instead of or along with MD maps for model retail shops. Furthermore, the system may be constructed so that the processing that sets the MD maps for individual retail shops on the basis of MD maps for model retail shops is performed in the present information processing system, or so that this processing is performed in a separate system (e. g., shipping system or the like).

Furthermore, for example, it is also conceivable that the system might be constructed so that reference information is output for a VMD (visual merchandising) phase that is positioned as one of the marketing phases. The term "VMD phase" refers to a phase that performs
5 planning and presentation for consumers by constructing a unified image with respect to retail shop image, retail shop atmosphere, merchandise arrangement methods, specifications of shop furnishings and equipment, preparation of sales-promoting materials and promotions, etc. By outputting reference information based on MD maps for such a VMD phase,
10 it is possible to perform VMD with reference to merchandise assortments in retail shops at various levels and various timings, so that retail shop planning and presentation can be performed with a dynamic tracking of retail shop merchandise assortments.

Furthermore, in the abovementioned embodiment, a supply
15 chain concerning articles of clothing was described as an example. However, the supply chain to which the present invention is applied is not limited to such a supply chain; for example, the present invention can also be applied to supply chains dealing with sundries or the like, or various other supply chains in businesses marketing products subject to
20 the physical restrictions of retail shops. Moreover, the present invention is not limited to supply chains involving physical objects; for example, embodiments of the present invention in which information contents are viewed as commercial products, and media that can offer information contents such as magazines, home pages, restaurant menus and the like
25 are viewed as retail shops, are also conceivable.

Furthermore, in the above description, an information

processing system and a recording medium were described as embodiments. However, embodiments of the present invention are not limited to these embodiments; the various processing operations performed in the abovementioned information processing system may be
5 comprehended as the supply chain management method of the present invention.

In the construction of the present invention, a supply chain can be managed using MD maps that specify retail shop merchandise assortments as a reference; accordingly, the degree of dependence on
10 the experience and skill of the parties involved can be reduced, and a stable supply chain can be constructed.

In particular, by controlling the MD maps for each unit MD map and each MD cycle, it is possible to control the merchandise assortments in retail shops in a dynamic manner even in the case of
15 business conditions in which large quantities of merchandise of various types are produced, business conditions in which the merchandise that is handled fluctuates in a short cycle, business conditions in which the volatility of demand is high, and business conditions involving merchandise of a highly thematic or suppositional nature.

20 The entire disclosure of Japanese Patent Application No. 2001-360885 filed on November 27, 2001, including the specification, claims, drawings and summary, is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.